

Definition of A Sonnet

The word sonnet comes from the Italian word “sonetto” which means “little song.”

A sonnet has come to be known generally as a poem containing fourteen lines of iambic pentameter.

Traditionally, sonnets have been classified into groups based on the rhyme scheme. William Shakespeare wrote his sonnets to rhyme: abab cdcd efef gg. Sonnets which follow this rhyme scheme are called Shakespearean Sonnets. There are also Petrarchan and Spenserian Sonnets which are based on rhyme schemes used by Edmund Spenser and Francesco Petrarch respectively.

Sonnets also generally contain a volta, or turn. This is a subtle device used to distract the reader from the monotonous beat of the iambic pentameter. When you turn from a set direction while driving, you may only veer a little to the left or right. You may turn 90 degrees right or left. Or, you may do a 180 degree u-turn. Likewise, the volta may be a subtle shift or a complete reversal of direction. Writers have used various devices to indicate the turn as well as placing the turn in different places. The Shakespearean Sonnet generally places the volta after the eighth line.

Sonnet Types

The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet is named for the 14th century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch who popularized the sonnet form.

The Petrarchan sonnet has a set rhyme scheme. The first eight lines, or octet, rhyme as follows:

abba abba

The last six lines, or sestet, can have various rhyme schemes.

The beginning of the sestet marks the volta, or turn in the sonnet. The sestet is often viewed as the solution to a problem posed in the octet.

A Shakespearean sonnet is written in iambic pentameter, which means that each line is 10 syllables long. The rhythm of each line should be like this:

soft-LOUD-soft-LOUD-soft-LOUD-soft-LOUD-soft-LOUD

All sonnets have fourteen lines. A Shakespearean sonnet, containing three quatrains (4-line stanzas) and one heroic couplet (rhyming 2 line stanza), rhymes like this (abab cdcd efef gg):

Line 1 rhymes with line 3
Line 2 rhymes with line 4
Line 3 rhymes with line 1
Line 4 rhymes with line 2
Line 5 rhymes with line 7
Line 6 rhymes with line 8
Line 7 rhymes with line 5
Line 8 rhymes with line 6
Line 9 rhymes with line 11
Line 10 rhymes with line 12
Line 11 rhymes with line 9
Line 12 rhymes with line 10
Line 13 rhymes with line 14
Line 14 rhymes with line 13

Last, most sonnets have a volta, or a turning point. In a Shakespearean sonnet the volta usually begins at line 13.

The Spenserian Sonnet

Very much like the Shakespearean sonnet, as Edmund Spenser was an English poet. The poem has three quatrains and one couplet with its rhyme scheme being more particular and difficult to master (ababbcbccdcdee).

The Modern Sonnet

Although the traditional sonnet follows a strict form consisting of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, many writers from the 20th century to the present day have sought to expand the sonnet form by “loosening” some of the requirements of the traditional sonnet.

These “modern sonnets” are typically still short, lyric poems in the spirit of the traditional sonnet. So, the name sonnet, which means “little song” can still be said to apply to them. However, not all short, lyric poems are sonnets, modern or traditional.

How then, do we identify the modern sonnet?

Generally, modern sonnet writers attempt to keep some of the traditional sonnet forms while abandoning others. The most common modern sonnet is a fourteen-lined lyric poem that does not employ iambic pentameter or a set rhyme scheme.

Other modern sonnets might use ten or twelve lines of iambic pentameter instead of fourteen. Often these “shortened” sonnets will still follow a set rhyme scheme or contain a distinct volta.

Blank verse sonnets might also be considered modern. A blank verse sonnet employs iambic pentameter, but does not rhyme.

I find it useful to think of a sonnet as a house. Traditionally a house has windows, doors, a roof and walls. But, what if a house of the future found it could do without doors or windows? What if the roof or walls could be replaced by some sort of energy field? Would it still be recognizable as a house? It might seem strange at first, but after living in it for a while, you would probably come to think of it as a house just the same.

Try “living” in a modern sonnet for a while. If it starts to feel like a sonnet to you, then it probably is one. At least you should be able to make a good argument for it in your poetry class!

One way I like to “live” in a sonnet is to give it the “out loud test.” Sonnets, being lyrical in nature, were meant to be read out loud. A sonnet that doesn’t sound good out loud to me is probably not really worthy of the title of sonnet. Of course this is a very subjective test, but subjectivity is a big part of interpreting poetry.